

Sunday, January 13, 2002



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Karen Kandel with Peter Pan in the Mabou Mines production of "Peter and Wendy," returning to the New Victory Theater Feb. 1.

A One-Woman Cast Of Many Characters

IN the Mabou Mines production of "Peter and Wendy," Karen Kandel as the narrator sits down with J. M. Barrie's "Peter Pan," and as the characters in the story and the objects in her playroom come to life in the hands of seven puppeteers, she provides all the speaking voices in a performance that has been called "an aural tour de force."

A Los Angeles Times critic marveled that "in one scene, she provides the narration and the sounds of Peter speaking gruffly and Wendy's quiet crying, all seemingly at once."

"Sometimes I'm unaware that I'm speaking all the time," Ms. Kandel said in a recent interview. "I know that sounds odd, but it reminds me of reading stories to my younger brother. It would never occur to me that I was doing all the voices. I was just telling the story and the voices came out." (The actress is currently appearing in the Mabou Mines production of "Ecco Porco," which closes on Jan. 27 at P.S. 122; performances of "Peter and Wendy" begin at the New Victory Theater on Feb. 1.)

A striking woman with a mellifluous voice and close-cropped hair, Ms. Kandel worked for more than five years with the director Lee Breuer and with Liza Lorwin, who adapted "Peter Pan," to create the show.

"When we started, there was only a Peter puppet and Nana the dog," she said. "I did all the other voices without puppets, so it was like reading a storybook. When more puppeteers came in, the choreographic element became more important — how to let the audience know who is speaking and when. If I'm talking for Peter, I look at Peter" — that is, the puppet Peter, manipulated by three masked performers — "and try not to do anything physical, so all the focus goes there. If I'm Wendy, I'm more animated. If I'm the narrator, I look directly at the audience. That choreography is the hardest part of doing the show."

A long history of performing in nontraditional theater prepared Ms. Kandel, a native New Yorker, for "Peter and Wendy." In 1975 she was

an English major just out of Queens College when she auditioned for the composer and director Elizabeth Swados, who kept her busy for nine years in such Off Broadway productions as "Nightclub Cantata," "Runaways" (which opened at the Public Theater and later moved to Broadway) and "Alice in Concert," which starred Meryl Streep.

Dissatisfied with her work, Ms. Kandel dropped out of the theater for several years, during which she built doll houses, hung wallpaper and worked in a hardware store. At the urging of her husband, the actor Paul Kandel, she returned to the theater in 1985 in Anne Bogart's production of "The Making of Americans" by Gertrude Stein. But she credits Mr. Breuer with reinvigorating her love for performing when he cast her as Edgar/Edna in his gender-reversed "Lear" in 1990.

"There was a scene on a telephone pole where Lee kept saying I could be as grotesque and animal-like as possible," she recalled. "I wasn't that physically free yet, and I resisted. It was my husband who said: 'Do what he says. What do you have to lose?' I started getting more crazy, improvising during the performance, and I had so much fun that I realized I could do just about anything."

Ms. Kandel would like to work in movies and television, but casting directors don't seem to know what to do with her. "I've been called 'too sophisticated,'" she said. "I think that means I don't fit the stereotype of a welfare mother or a tough sassy black woman. Not that I couldn't play that, but it's not what I present when I walk into the room."

Her star turn in "Peter and Wendy" led to her being cast in Bright Sheng's opera "The Silver River" at the Spoleto Festival in 2000, in the speaking role of the Golden Buffalo.

She likes her reputation as someone who can play anything, but she will settle for less. "This is how low I've sunk — I want to play a girl in a dress," she said with a huge laugh. "I want to put on some makeup and play a girl in a dress."

DON SHEWEY